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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000514

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: PUK RESHUFFLE POINTS TO DPM BARHAM SALIH FOR KRG PM

REF: BAGHDAD 478

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Robert S. Ford for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. Internal wrangling among the Kurdish political leadership is going to generate changes among the Kurdish leaders in Baghdad and Kurdistan and will likely leave the Kurds less able to work with PM Nouri al-Maliki in a serious way, at least in the short term. The latest spate of highly publicized Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) internal power struggles has pre-empted the planned PUK congress set for May 2009 to decide party leadership positions. The constant barrage of press coverage appears to have forced Iraqi President Jalal Talabani into tough negotiations to keep the party intact (reftel). In order to shore up criticism and re-instate the PUK's strength in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Deputy Foreign Minister Barham Salih is likely to become KRG Prime Minister and replace current PM Nechirvan Barzani. While strengthening the PUK's position in the KRG, the Kurds lose an influential and respected voice in Baghdad at a time of heightened tensions between the Kurds and PM Maliki. End Summary.

PUK "DO THE SHUFFLE"

12. (C) On February 22, Talabani's Advisor Aram Yarwessi told PolOff that the PUK will replace Kurdistan Democratic Party's (KDP) PM Nechirvan Barzani with a PUK candidate, and set in motion a game of musical chairs. In order to halt criticism and bolster the PUK's strength in the KRG, Talabani nominated his strongest and trusted candidate, GoI Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih, for the KRG Prime Minister slot. On February 25, DPM Salih texted PolOff from Sulaimaniyah: "It's too early (for it) to be real, let's call it mere speculation for now." On February 26, PUK parliamentarian Friad Rwanduzi told PolOff that although Barham has been put forward as the sole candidate for the KRG Premiership, KRG VP Kosrat Rasoul will lobby for the position as the PUK prepares to convene its plenum in late March. On February 26, DPM Salih's Protocol Officer Tala al-Hashemi was less cagey about the nomination when he confided to PolOff that he would need a new job since his boss (Barham) would soon go North.

13. (C) With Barham sliding into the KRG PM slot, Talabani nominated PUK Water Minister Latif Rashid to replace Barham as GoI Deputy Prime Minister. This would leave the Water Ministry without a qualified technocrat. (Note: Rashid was unavailable for comment. He is on a trip to the United States. End Note) Rashid is not thought of as a particularly strong minister politically, although he gets along reasonably well with Maliki. On February 27, Yarwessi told PolOff that Rashid is not close to Barzani at all. Rwanduzi lamented that, with the exception of PUK Politburo member Emad Ahmed, there are no Sulaimaniyah-based politburo members that would perform well in Baghdad.

14. (C) On February 24, Yarwessi informed PolOff of several other KRG nominations: PUK Emad Ahmed Saifur will be the new KRG Deputy Prime Minister, Sheikh Jaafar Sheikh Mustafa will serve as the KRG Minister of Pesh merga Affairs, Jalal Sheikh Karim will become the KRG Deputy Interior Minister and Mayor of Sulaimaniyah Qadir Hama Jan Aziz will become the Director General of the Asayeesh. Yarwessi explained that these KRG positions were previously KDP's.

15. (C) On February 23, before Talabani left for his state visit to South Korea, he accepted the resignations of Qvisit to South Korea, he accepted the resignations of Nawshirwan's reform group (Jalal Jawhar, Omer Sayid Ali, Osama Haji Mahmud and Mustafa Sayid Qadir). Yarwessi explained that the signed resignation letters were drawn up in Dokhan (December 2008) and since the group decided to work against and not with Talabani, the letters were officially activated. Talabani then designated Deputy General Secretary Kosrat Rasoul to negotiate with Nawshirwan Mustafa, who did not join his reform group and resign. According to PUK parliamentarian Friad Rwanduzi, Talabani was irritated that Nawshirwan Mustafa forced leadership changes two months before PUK's congress. However, now that the reshuffle has been negotiated, it frees up PUK to campaign and focus on preparations for the upcoming congress and KRG elections.

COMMENT

16. (C) Internal PUK squabbles have consumed Talabani's time and attention the last five months, often distracting him from "fighting the fight" in Baghdad. These squabbles are

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indicative of the KDP's increasing power over the PUK in the KRG. In terms of internal PUK dynamics, this struggle also suggests that Nawshirwan, who has until now been regarded as third in line to Talabani, is losing influence. Disgruntled, power-seeking, reform-minded PUK members, associated with Nawshirwan, came close to taking the party down. Talabani's ability to negotiate has kept PUK intact for now. However, Talabani's choice of DPM Barham Salih as KRG PM, while strengthening the PUK's position in the KRG, would weaken PUK's authority in Baghdad at a time of heightened tensions between the Kurds and the Maliki government. Having no one but Latif Rashid to put in the DPM slot also demonstrates that the PUK has no bench from which to draw.
BUTENIS